

Virginia budget hits education funding, attacks abortion rights

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The Virginia General Assembly recently passed its \$47 billion fiscal budget for 2011-2012. While partially restoring funding for some items targeted by Republican Governor Robert McDonnell, the drafting process clearly shows the major big business parties are in fundamental agreement that the budget shortfall should come out of programs for the working class and the poor.

The Republican-controlled House of Delegates and the Democratic-controlled Senate both ratified the budget package February 26 by voice votes, without audible opposition, after extending the 40-day budget session by one day in order to resolve a handful of disputed issues.

While attacking education and social programs, the budget boosts funding for state policing and sets policies favorable to big business. At the last minute, the budget legislation also tacked on a reactionary measure targeting abortion clinics.

Government employees will now be required to pay an additional 5 percent of their pay into their state pensions. They will receive a raise of nearly the same amount to partially offset this, their first raise in several years. Discarded was a proposition favored by the governor to ditch the state pensions entirely in favor of a defined contribution 401k plan.

Also under attack are social safety net programs. Since 2009 the Healthy Families Virginia program has seen its funding decline by 40 percent, from \$5.4 million in 2009 to \$3.5 million today. The program “provides educational, therapeutic, and supportive services to first-time parents, before the baby is born (or is no older than 3 months) up to age 5.” As a result of the cuts, many families will be forced to forego basic needs and care for their children.

Direct Aid to Public Education will see a \$1 billion reduction in funds from its base budget four years ago, with a slight increase in 2012 due to deferred or staggered methods of funding.

The College of William and Mary, located in Williamsburg, has lost nearly 20 percent in funding since 2009, with this year’s budget gutting it by another \$16 million to \$421,599,608. George Mason University, centered in Fairfax, will see a decline in funding by \$10 million.

There will also be sweeping cuts in Virginia’s Department of Transportation, tasked with the operating and maintenance of roads, which will see a cut of \$130 million.

One item garnering controversy was Governor McDonnell’s effort to slash nearly all funding from Virginia’s Public Broadcasting programs, a proposal that was softened somewhat by the state Senate. Presented as a victory for public broadcasting, the public television and radio stations will still take a cut of nearly \$1.3 million over the next two years.

Educational programs for state prison inmates will be cut by \$6 million over two years. While the Department of Corrections will see a \$25 million cut from its total budget, key policing institutions will see increases. There will be \$22 million more for sheriffs and \$12.4 million more for police stations.

Included in the budget bill is an anti-abortion measure that targets clinics that perform at least five first-trimester abortions a month. These clinics will now be regulated as hospitals instead of as doctors’ offices. Abortion rights advocates argue that the regulations could force as many as 17 of the 21 abortion clinics in Virginia to close, denying women in the state access to an abortion.

Some regulations include requiring equal numbers of

parking spaces and bed spaces, food facilities, as well as widened hallways. Both requirements are highly impractical, as first-trimester abortions (the only method legal in Virginia) do not require overnight stays, and many of the clinics are either offices owned by the practitioner or rented.

Several anti-abortion Democrats came together with Republicans to secure the passage of the measure, which will make Virginia one of the most restrictive states for obtaining an abortion. “This is a devastating day for the women of Virginia,” Jessica Honke, director of public policy for Planned Parenthood Advocates of Virginia, told the *Washington Post*.

Democratic and Republican delegates and senators congratulated each other on the “bipartisanship” involved in drawing up the overall spending package. A quote from Democratic delegate Jim Scott’s website sums up this attitude: “The fact that there were no dissenting votes says a lot about their effectiveness, efforts, and creativity.”

While attacking social programs, the budget awards business interests a nearly across-the-board increase in funding, with the Virginia Economic Development Partnership receiving \$5 million, a 25 percent increase in funding.

Hailing the state’s pro-business attitude, the partnership describes itself on its website as “a holding account for state incentive programs to localities, companies opening or expanding a business facility within the Commonwealth, and production companies and producers who film their product in the Commonwealth, and assistance to impacted localities.” It cites Richmond, Norfolk and Northern Virginia as success stories in this regard.

Ernst & Young provides an example of what is meant by “pro-business” in a recent report on statewide business taxes. The business think tank notes that corporate taxes in Virginia are 3.6 percent, or nearly 1 percent below the national average. This translates into billions for corporations.

Meanwhile, the social conditions in many pro-business metropolitan “hot spots” tell the real story. Richmond, Virginia, has a poverty rate of 22 percent, with many neighborhoods seeing levels nearly of 50 percent. Mineral-heavy areas in southwestern Virginia see the highest poverty levels. Areas such as Galax register a median income just barely over the official

poverty level.

According to a 2010 study by the Poverty Reduction Task Force, a committee appointed by the commonwealth, in 2008, 750,000 Virginians, or roughly 10.5 percent of the population, lived in poverty, with a third of this group being children.



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